

## **The Cherry Mine Disaster and its effects on Labor and Labor Unions in the United States**

Samuel Klein

*University High School, Urbana*

Teacher: Rosemary Laughlin

One of the most terrible mine disasters in the United States happened in the small Illinois town of Cherry. It is still a haunting memory. A large pyramid stands on the ruins of what was once a coal mine, ranked the third worst coal mine disaster in the United States and the worst coal mine fire. It most definitely should not have happened and was an accident.

During the early years of mining, the state government did not have very many safety requirements or procedures and mining companies showed little or no concern for the safety of their employees. Bituminous coal companies had been organized in 1861, during the Civil War. Anthracite miners in Pennsylvania started seven years later. In the late 1880s there were six organized labor unions in the United States. By 1909 there were one hundred and seventy-one unions with more than two million members. The nineteen-year-old United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) was a very strong union. The main interest of the UMWA was creating a fair wage scale in order that wages would be the same all over the country. This stopped coal companies from decreasing wages to gain unfair advantages over their competitors. Also the miners paid little attention to safety because they were hurrying to get as much work done as possible. This is understandable because they were paid by how much they did per day. Wounded or even killed workmen had limited financial liability.

The history of the St. Paul Mine is an interesting one. The town of Cherry was one of the St. Paul Coal Company's creations. The town, the school, the park, and the mine were all created by the coal company at a cost of \$200,000. The St. Paul Mine was the first mine with electricity.

It was made of steel, concrete, brick, and stone and had the largest coal shaft. It was known all over the world as a safe mine which was supposedly fireproof. Immigrants came to work there from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Scotland, Sweden, Yugoslavia, and the United States. They had responded to advertisements for workers in search of a better life. Some Americans were threatened and rejected the immigrants who worked a lot harder than they did and sometimes got jobs when they did not. Miners received \$2.50 a day, roughly equal to \$45 in the present, and, in addition, they had to pay for their own tools and to sharpen them.

No one would expect such a state-of-the-art mine to end in a disaster. The underground tunnels in the Illinois coal mines were always dark, dirty, and dangerous. The miners worked in total darkness. They often crouched for hours chipping coal from small spaces where they could not fully stand. For eight hour shifts they breathed poisonous fumes and coal dust which damaged their lungs. Examples of the disaster that occurred in mines included underground explosions, the flooding of the shafts, the spread of poisonous gases or fire.

Fire and toxic gases caused the Cherry Coal Mine Disaster. At 7:00 A.M., on November 13, 1909, 480 men and boys descended into the mine, in some cases, 500 feet underground. The electrical system had broken down so they used kerosene torches. Around lunch time several bales of hay were dropped down the hoist to feed the mules that pulled carts of coal. Mat Francesco, age 15, and another man pushed a hay cart over to the stable area but it came to rest under an open torch. Soon it caught on fire which began to spread rapidly.

Many tales of unbelievable pain followed. A group of miners 500 feet below ground built a wall of mud, rocks, and timbers to block off the deadly gases. After eight days they could not stand it. They tore down the barricades and crawled around the tunnels until they found a search party. Twenty-one men from that group survived. As soon as the State Mine Experiment

and Mine Life Saving Station at the University of Illinois at Urbana heard about the disaster, they sent rescue equipment and help because there was little at the site. But by the end of the first day, 259 men and boys had died.

What happened after this terrifying incident? Before the Cherry Mine Disaster, the state regulated mining. A month later President William Howard Taft was expected to encourage Congress to create a federal bureau of mines in order to prevent similar accidents. The United States Bureau of Mines was created in 1910. Illinois Governor Charles S. Deneen called a special legislative session to consider an employer's liability law to make sure that companies would be held responsible for harm to miners. He also required mine owners to purchase and maintain firefighting equipment and to employ certain workers to pass certification exams. They also gave \$100,000 for relief funds and built three mine rescue stations. The United Mine Workers of America in Illinois demanded that child labor laws were enforced so that mine inspectors had to make sure that working children were the ages they said they were. All ten boys employed in the Cherry Mine, including the one who started the fire, were hired illegally, before they had turned sixteen. Four were killed in the fire.

The United Mine Workers of America donated \$1,800 to families affected by the disaster. Many performed other acts of kindness. A memorial was erected on the site and a monument to those who died stands in the center of the graveyard. Items related to the incident are in the Cherry Public Library.

At present, more and more efforts to make mines safer are being initiated. There are also many strikes by miners to get higher pay. This is exemplified in the movie "October Sky." Recently, eight miners were trapped in a flooded mine in Pennsylvania. All they had to survive on were a few sandwiches and a can of soda. The man who had this lunch shared it with his fellow workers so all of them would survive. Also, all of the miners tied themselves with rope so

if one of them became unconscious, another could pull the person up so they would not drown. All of them survived. These acts of kindness and heroism have stimulated many people of this country to make mines safer.

All in all, many people were affected by the Cherry Mine Disaster. Hundreds of women were widowed and five hundred children were orphaned. The Cherry Mine Disaster was definitely one of the most depressing and horrible accidents ever in a coal mine but the country handled it well, making mining safer.

[From Illinois Labor History Society, "Story of the Great Cherry Mine Disaster," [www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/cherrymi.htm](http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/cherrymi.htm) (Oct. 7, 2002); Karen Tintori, *Trapped*; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Institute of Labor & Industrial Relations, "Cherry Mine Disaster," [www.ilir.uiuc.edu/lii/landmark.html#Cherry](http://www.ilir.uiuc.edu/lii/landmark.html#Cherry) (Oct. 7, 2002).]